

This story was published in **RESPONSE** Magazine.



POCKETS

By Jane R. Snyder

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“Gold?” Bertha had always said, her every-present question mark ending every other sentence. “There’s more gold in that floor than my Sam ever found on the streets of New York.”

I entered my grandmother’s kitchen, smiling, as I recalled her words. The shiny flecks were faded, but still visible, except for a few square feet in front of the huge double sink. Bertha’s apron, so worn it seemed pink cabbage roses would tumble right off the chintz onto the ancient linoleum, hung from a drawer handle.

Lifting the limp garment to my nose, I inhaled the combined aroma of toilet water, chicken fat and my *Bubbie*. Hugging the apron tighter, I felt something hard rub against my cheek.

Pushing aside a stale box of Streit’s matzoh, I spread the apron on the tabletop, next to a glass sugar bowl with a chipped cover, and a set of plastic salt and pepper shakers, shaped like grinning oranges, souvenir of a Miami Beach winter my grandparents had spent years ago. It laid flat, all but the pockets, sagging with the weight of hidden treasures.

“Oh, Bubbie,” I said, softly. As I pulled out a yellow vinyl chair to sit down, I heard a screw drop. It was the same one that had fallen a thousand times before. Bertha used to say she got all the exercise she needed chasing grandchildren, tying Sam’s laces, and picking up that loose screw.

“Better a screw loose in the chair than in the head,” Sam said, each time it fell. Gone sixteen years before her, Bertha had replaced it without him all that time. She never got around to buying the nut that would have prevented its repeated trips across the floor. I think Sam’s memory got in her way.

Bertha had been a southpaw, so I picked the right pocket first thinking the best of her surprises would be waiting in the left. I wanted to save that side for last. Slipping my hand past the limp ruffles, I gathered all the contents at once and dropped them on the table, reaching quickly to make sure nothing rolled away.

Resting on the scalloped placemat were several crumpled tissues tinted with Bertha’s favorite, Cherries in the Snow, lipstick; four copper pennies; one white collar button with two holes; a tarnished thimble with a sizable dent; an expired newspaper coupon from the *Daily Forward*, seven cents off any Manischewitz product; a broken safety pin; and Bertha’s tattered tape measure which began at the three-inch mark.

I picked up the tape, ran my fingers over its many cracks and remembered the countless hours Bertha had run it around my waist, up my arms, or against my hemlines, never forgetting to subtract the missing three inches. Bertha may have had a golden floor, but her hands were more golden than money.

Sam, who was the sexton at Beth El, had worn her sweaters in the drafty synagogue year round. He said they felt as though he was being hugged. And, oh, how Bertha could hug! For a tiny woman, she was all arms. I, especially, loved to snuggle under Bertha’s arms, napping away afternoons in her big, overstuffed chair.

“Shhhh,” she always told the family, “my little angel is sleeping.”

I remembered how Bertha stroked my hair, leaned my head against her apron, and read her *Forward* with one hand, so as not to disturb my sleep. More often than not, Bertha fell asleep too, and, God Help You, if you phoned while she was napping. Everyone knew not to call between two or three, unless there was an emergency. Good news, no matter what, always waited until after *Bubbe’s* nap.

I tucked the tape and thimble in my jeans then threw the other items into the trash. There were enough nice things to remind me of Bertha, I didn't need to hold onto junk too. Repositioning myself in the chair, I contemplated the remaining pocket.

Deciding to wait, I brought another carton in from the dining room and filled it with canned goods from the shelves in the pantry. They would be picked up, along with some clothes and linens, by the local shelter, run jointly by Beth El and a church around the corner. Tossing moldy cheese, wilted vegetables and stale bread into a Hefty bag, I grabbed a sponge and went to work on her old icebox. How many times had Bertha opened and closed that door? She made magic in that small kitchen; magic and memories that weighed heavily in my mind.

Next, I went to work on the closets. Bertha's kosher kitchen overflowed with china, crystal and silver, not to mention the holiday wares buried under the drain board beside her pots. Federal Express would be kept busy carrying Bertha's finest to family in Cleveland, Miami and southern Jersey: the *milchig* set for David, along with the silver; the *fleischig* for Myrna, along with the crystal and matching decanter; the Passover sets for my parents; and the pots divided among family and friends. I pictured Uncle Abe's chubby face grinning once Bertha's wooden chopping bowl finally reached Collins Avenue.

Bertha's will had already divided the choicest of her possessions as she had wanted. The candlesticks, wine cups, brass menorah, Seder plate, esrog box and Sam's beloved library were all in the hands of those who would cherish them as much as my grandparents had.

The family, in asking me to undertake closing the apartment, had said I could keep whatever else I fancied. I, who had already received the candlesticks, several pieces of Bertha's jewelry and a sizable bankbook, held in trust since my birth, was the nostalgic one.

I carefully filled three boxes with Bertha's sewing box; family albums; two beaded bags she had treasured; several of Bertha's yuntif hats, still in good condition; the comb, brush, and mirror set that sat on her bureau; and, since I couldn't bear to part with them, the size six, brocade

shoes she had worn to my wedding to Joshua four years ago.

It wasn't as though if Bertha had clicked her heels together she would have been transported back to Vilna, but I just couldn't bring myself to throw them away. Bertha's plants were already packed in two other cartons, although I wasn't sure where I would find room for them all.

The Salvation Army would come on Tuesday, leaving just the chair Bertha had napped in and the standing mirror in her bedroom for my husband to pick up the following day. Josh, whom Bertha had called, "*a guteh neshumah*" until the day she died, had loved her too. It was he who suggested we find room for her chair in our too tiny Manhattan apartment. I loved him all the more the moment he'd said it. Josh even volunteered to help me with the chores, but I'd explained it was something I had to do alone.

The bedroom had been hardest, working my way through Bertha's drawers and closet. Dresses; shoes; hats; the old, black Persian coat Bertha had loved; suitcases, some stuffed with bolts of fabric, buttons and zippers she had never gotten around to using; the old Hoover vacuum; and a bag of half-finished knitting, a baby sweater for the twinkle in someone's eye, I didn't know whose. Perhaps she had hoped to see me deliver a great-grandchild, but it was not to be.

I wiped my damp forehead with a paper towel, looked at the clock above the stove and hurried to finish. I promised Josh I would try to get home in time for dinner. All I wanted now was a hot bath and some sleep. Bertha would have offered me cream sherry. Glancing at the cabinet where my grandparents had kept the liquor, I realized I was too tired to even open it. Since I needed more cartons anyway, I decided to come back in the morning to complete my work.

As I went through the apartment turning out lights, I walked past the kitchen again and saw Bertha's apron. I crossed the doorsill, stooped to pick up her wandering screw and sat down once again. The room felt so empty without Bertha. I felt so empty without Bertha. Blinking back a tear, I put my hand into the left-hand pocket.

There were too many things to grab at once, so I took what I could and opened my hand slowly. Beneath my curled fingers I found one of Bertha's hairnets, rolled in a ball, pierced by two bobby pins with the ends chewed off. The way Bertha had said it, it always sounded like "*Bubbe* pin."

Stuck to an old lemon drop, her favorite candy, was the corner of an air mail envelope with an Israeli stamp picturing a gazelle. Bertha had loved both Israel and animals with a passion. The stamp must have come off a letter from her cousin, Nechama, in Tel Aviv. Those letters made Bertha feel like she was there, in the land of milk and honey, long after she was too unwell to travel.

Under the hairnet, I found a pin I had given her ages ago. It was made from shells glued to a cheap plastic backing, a summer camp creation, made long before I knew the difference between "good" jewelry and the fake kind my Aunt Dora favored. I couldn't believe she had kept it all these years. Grandmothers, I think, are the only ones who can love like that when the gift comes from a child.

I put my hand in the pocket again and pulled out one of Bertha's lace-edged handkerchiefs. Crushed in a tight ball, I found several knots tying it together. I laid it on the table and began to untie the corners. Separating the ends, I pushed aside the fabric and found Bertha's ring, the one Great-Grandpa Solomon had given her when she left Vilna for America.

I turned it to the lingering sunlight and watched the diamonds and rubies gleam in their rose gold setting. Rectangular stones ran round and round like a circular staircase, leading to the center where a round-cut diamond sat grandly. I began to cry. It was the ring Bertha had left me in her will. No one had been able to find it. We had turned the apartment upside down, emptied all three of the safe deposit boxes, checked Bertha's jewel box, and the miscellaneous jars, drawers and corners where she had hid important mementoes through the years.

Leave it to Bertha! I wiped my eyes with the hankie, but was too overcome to put the ring on. I rubbed it against my palm and pictured it on Bertha's hand as she cooked, cleaned, sewed, prayed and loved. She had put it

aside, perhaps not as carefully as she should have, knowing I would find it after all.

I touched the stones and remembered Bertha's wonderful stories. How her father had put it on her hand for luck, for *mazel*, Bertha had said, beaming. How he described the stones as a staircase to heaven, saying they would help her prayers go directly there. I began to cry once again, having feared it was gone forever, lost in some place no one would ever find, or, God forbid, thrown out by accident, a victim of my grandmother's failing eyes.

I closed my fingers over the ring, blew my nose, recited the *Shechecheyanu* under my breath and slipped the ring on my hand.

Two fingers away from my wedding band it looked exactly as if it belonged.

"Bubbie, you knew. You knew I'd find it," I said, boldly.

With the memories rising in my throat, I stood, put out the light and made my way to the front door. As I turned to the *mezuzah*, I kissed Bertha's ring first and then reached out to touch the sacred scroll.

"I love you, Bubbie," I whispered, my left hand against the doorpost. "I always will."

